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ABSTRACT

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 emphasizes the importance of high quality, accessible, and relevant information about the labor market for making sound decisions. In order to help both workers and employers, as well as the government agencies that serve them, the Workforce Information System was created and is being improved. The action plan for serving workforce information customers addresses these three broad priorities: (1) strengthen customer feedback for continuous improvement (conduct customer focus groups, develop state customer satisfaction measurement methods, clearly define and prioritize unmet local data needs, and identify priority improvement actions); (2) work to fill critical data gaps (provide benefits information, generate local skills information, improve local unemployment data, collect occupational skills data, and measure dynamic labor market change); and (3) improve workforce information analysis and delivery (provide access to information analysis and delivery, provide labor market information delivery with other workforce systems, improve occupational informational products, link consumer reports and workforce information delivery, ensure universal access to workforce information, and improve staff skills and tools). The Workforce Information System has been in place for about 2 years; highlights of progress to date are new and expanded workforce information, creating mechanisms for improving the system, communication and outreach, and measuring customer satisfaction. (KC)

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Quality Information – Informed Choices!

Advancing the Workforce Information System

Secretary of Labor's Workforce Information System Plan for Federal Fiscal Years 2001 – 2005

Workforce Information Council

www.workforceinfocouncil.org

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VISION for the Workforce Information System

The workforce information system will efficiently provide quality information that its customers can easily access and use to make informed choices.

The nationwide system will provide comparable appropriate data for all States, and be responsive to customer needs for local, State, and national information.

The system will work to anticipate and meet the changing needs of customers, support analysis and research, and use customer feedback for continuous improvement.

A Message from the Secretary of Labor

As our nation enters this new century, we are experiencing tremendous change, from the global economy to rapidly changing technology to the pending retirement of the Baby Boom generation. International corporations as well as small companies, family stores and farms are adapting to new ways of doing business and reaching out to new markets. Educators and training organizations are scrambling to provide new skills and use new "e-learning" tools. Experienced workers and new job seekers alike are upgrading their skills to get and keep good jobs.

The Department of Labor can help Americans reach their fullest potential by offering the training and skills they need to succeed in our rapidly changing world. Together with business, labor, and our State and local partners, we all must help build the "workforce of the 21st century."

The Workforce Investment Act is our starting point. The vision of the Act is to provide individuals with a broad range of workforce services to achieve their career aspirations. The Act streamlines these services into a one-stop system under the guidance of State and local business-led workforce investment boards. This system seeks to empower individuals to make informed job and training choices. And it requires accountability from service providers.

To ensure that this vision becomes a reality, the Workforce Investment Act contains a small but critical provision establishing a structure for the nation's employment statistics system. This provision adds a new section to the Wagner-Peyser Act that requires the Secretary of Labor to oversee the development and continuous improvement of a nationwide employment statistics system.

Timely and accurate information about the labor market is the key to enabling individuals, businesses, and workforce investment boards to make informed decisions. They need to know which occupations and industries are growing or declining, what skills are required, how much different jobs pay, and where to find training. They also need to be able to access this information easily and compare job trends across the nation.

This Annual Plan was prepared by the Workforce Information Council to help guide the improvement of our employment statistics system. I congratulate the Council on providing a vision for this system and setting goals that will improve that system. Because all workers should have the information they need to make decisions that will lead them toward fulfilling, rewarding careers.

Elaine L. Chao
October, 2001

- Two-thirds of the fastest growing occupations over the next decade are in the computer and health fields.

- The most rapid growth will be in occupations requiring an associate degree or higher. However, four in 10 job openings will be in occupations where only short-term, on-the-job training is needed.

- Total employment increased by about 1.8 million in 2000. At the same time, more than one million workers lost their jobs in large-scale extended layoffs, including seasonal and temporary as well as permanent layoffs.

To make informed choices, employers, individuals, and many other decision-makers need to be responsive to these and other sometimes confusing labor market trends.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, built on the principles of individual choice and State and local decision-making, emphasizes the importance of high quality, accessible, and relevant information about the labor market for making sound decisions.

The workforce information system must serve those who need help in preparing for work and in finding a job. In addition, the system must serve today's 132 million working Americans who will, over their careers, need access to information that will help them upgrade their skills to meet the demands of a changing economy, or help them find new and better jobs.

Workforce Information System Customers

Employers make decisions about product and financial markets, business location, and employee recruitment, compensation, and training.

Current and Future Members of the Labor Force, including young people and adults, make choices about careers, education, training, and jobs.

Elected Officials and Policy Makers, including workforce investment boards, make decisions about law, policy, budgets, and regulations.

Program Planners determine what workforce and economic development services to provide, and evaluate program performance.

Education and Training Providers, including teachers and curriculum specialists, design, deliver, and evaluate programs that develop students' knowledge and skills.

Intermediaries, such as parents, counselors, teachers, mentors, placement workers, and case workers, assist others in choosing education and training opportunities, and in finding employment, and

Researchers study how the labor market works, and conduct policy research.

Workforce information customers are the individuals and organizations needing an understanding of the labor market for making personal and business decisions.

Employers, including private sector leaders on state and local workforce investment boards, need information for strategic decision-making and economic development.

Quality workforce information is important for students and their parents, as well as for adults, as they make education, training, and job choices.

These and other workforce information customers are a tremendously diverse group, but they share a need for information available quickly in a usable form.

Customers differ in how often and how intensively they use information,

in their preferences for how to access it, and in the level of geographic and other detail they need.

To help make that workforce information available to all these current and potential customers, the Secretary of Labor and the Governors are charged by the Workforce Investment Act with developing and managing the nationwide and State workforce information systems. With the help of the Workforce Information Council, the Secretary plans for and oversees the development and improvement of the system.

Priorities for Serving Customers

Today's workforce information system has many assets, including strong data collection systems and standards, new analysis tools, research and development capacity, and innovative information delivery systems using the Internet and other electronic technology.

We will work to sustain and improve this system to better meet the needs of its wide range of customers.

The action plan for serving workforce information customers addresses three broad priorities:

1) strengthen customer feedback for continuous improvement,
2) work to fill critical data gaps, and
3) improve workforce information analysis and delivery.

Priority 1. Strengthen Customer Feedback for Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement of the workforce information system starts with input from customers on their needs for workforce information and their satisfaction with existing products and services. Equally important is establishing customers' priorities, that is, their tradeoffs among competing data needs. Currently, some States are carrying out customer feedback activities, but no formal system exists across the nation.

Conduct Customer Focus Groups. During FY 2001-2002, the Council will give customers a voice in shaping the workforce information system through focus groups with key customer groups.

Develop State Customer Satisfaction Measurement Methods. The Council will work with the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and the States to develop customer satisfaction measurement methods for use at the state level. This effort will build on customer satisfaction programs that exist in some States, and on national activities to meet the customer satisfaction measurement requirements of the Workforce Investment Act.

Clearly Define and Prioritize Unmet Local Data Needs. To address the growing demand for local labor market data, the Council will collaborate with customer groups and stakeholders to explore in detail the critical gaps in local data. This will result in a clear definition of, and priorities among, the specific local data needs that are not being met. It also will allow us to better understand the local geographic detail required and the uses to which these data will be put. This effort will be carried out with special attention to the needs of workforce investment boards and career-technical education.

Action Steps to Strengthen Customer Feedback

- Conduct customer focus groups
- Develop customer satisfaction measurement methods
- Clearly define and prioritize unmet local data needs
- Identify priority improvement actions

Identify Priority Improvement Actions. The resulting customer information will be used by the Council and by the States to identify and prioritize actions for improvement.

We will work to provide:

- Opportunities at the national and State levels for customers to rate their satisfaction with the workforce information system and to provide input on their needs, and
- Improvements to the workforce information services and products in response to customers' input.

Priority 2. Work to Fill Critical Data Gaps

Today's workforce information system is built on strong data collection systems and standards that generate a variety of quality labor market data. These and future data should be consistent with appropriate Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) standards and definitions, including publication and disclosure standards.

In addition to the current data systems, many customers have expressed the need for new or different data, including data on current job vacancies, occupational skills, and fringe benefits at the state and local levels.

Customers also desire improvements in the existing information, especially more detailed data for local areas, more timely data, and better data quality and consistency. They want information on rapidly changing occupational areas such as information technology.

Provide Benefits Information. In FY 2001, the Council will explore whether, how, and at what cost to the Department of Labor, the States, and localities, it might be possible to provide state and local information on employee benefits.

We will work to explore:

- State and local benefits data that will help individuals make career and job search decisions, and businesses make employee compensation decisions.

Priorities for Serving Customers

Generate Local Skills Information. The Council will support and evaluate ways to provide more timely information on labor market area skill needs, through capturing information from job matching systems and coordinating with other indicators of labor market demand such as short-term employment forecasts and occupational vacancy data projects.

Potential Action Steps to Fill Critical Data Gaps

Provide critical new data

- Provide benefits information
- Generate local skills information

Improve existing data

- Improve local unemployment data
- Collect occupational skills data
- Measure dynamic labor market change

We will work to provide:

- Local and timely information derived from the high volume of transactions on America's Job Bank and State labor exchange systems that will help job seekers, employers, and others understand and respond to local skill needs.

Improve Local Unemployment Data. Beginning in FY 2001, the Bureau of Labor Statistics will develop and implement improvements in local area labor force, employment, and unemployment data, taking advantage of opportunities afforded by the 2000 Census, which will provide data beginning in 2001, and the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which will provide data for all counties beginning in 2004.

We will work to provide:

- More accurate labor force data for States and local areas, and
- More demographic detail in State and local labor force data, assisting policy makers, planners, and education and training providers in understanding the labor force conditions of specific population groups in their local areas.

Collect Occupational Skills Data. During FY 2001, ETA initiated the data collection program for Occupational Information Network–O*NET– to update the database and refresh it on a regular basis. ETA also will continue research and development on O*NET measurement concepts and data collection methods.

We will work to provide:

- More current data on skills, abilities, tasks, and other occupational characteristics, assisting customers in making career and training decisions, and in designing education and training programs.

Measure Dynamic Labor Market Change. During FY 2001 and 2002, several approaches will be explored for developing new information on new hires, separations, and job vacancies. Such information will improve our understanding of the continuous flow of workers into and out of the labor market and the dynamic processes of job creation and destruction. If our explorations are successful, new methods will be provided for States to use in conducting local occupational vacancy studies. Initiatives to link wage records with other data, while protecting individual privacy and confidentiality, may provide a rich new database on labor market change.

We will work to explore:

- Occupational vacancy information for use in understanding local labor demand, and
- New information on labor market entrants, separations, recalls, and new hires for use in understanding rapid labor market change.

Potential Action Steps to Improve Information Analysis and Delivery

- Provide access to information across States
- Integrate labor market information delivery with other workforce systems
- Improve occupational information products
- Link consumer reports and workforce information delivery
- Ensure universal access to workforce information
- Improve staff skills and tools

Priority 3. Improve Workforce Information Analysis and Delivery

The workforce information system today provides for analysis of labor market trends and conditions, and delivers information to customers through a wide range of media. Innovative systems based on the Internet and other electronic technologies are widely available.

We believe, however, that customers want even more and better workforce information services. They especially want analysis and presentation tailored to their needs, including graphics and narrative interpretation. They also want easy-to-use electronic systems, attractive and understandable print reports, and presentations using other media. They want information delivery that facilitates access to information across several States and for areas that cross State boundaries.

Information delivery systems should have continuous support and improvement to keep the content current, add new content and features, improve formats and ease of use, and take advantage of rapidly changing technology to ensure access by all customers.

The Workforce Information Council has prioritized the following action steps to improve workforce information analysis and delivery.

Provide Access to Information Across State Boundaries. The Council will support and actively promote improvements to State information delivery systems to allow customers to access and compare information for interstate local areas and across multiple States.

We will work to provide:

- Easy access to State and local workforce information across States through improved and more widely available electronic systems.

Integrate Labor Market Information Delivery with Other Workforce Systems. The Council will develop guidelines and identify models for integrating labor market information delivery systems with other systems in the workforce development and One-Stop service delivery network. These include systems such as America's Career Kit, State labor exchange and job matching systems, client tracking and case management systems, and systems delivering information on the performance of training providers.

We will work to provide:

- Seamless access to state and local workforce information along with other services, assisting customers in making better career, training, and job search decisions.

Improve Occupational Information Products. The quality and availability of information about occupations will be maintained and improved by enhanced occupational and career information products, short-term employment forecasts, and skills-oriented information using O*NET and other skills research and databases. In addition, the Council will encourage projects to expand and improve the development and delivery of occupational supply information.

State official emphasizes importance of workforce information...

"Full and easy access to accurate, thorough labor market information is a fundamental component in any workforce development system. It is an even more crucial piece of our emerging local workforce investment board and One-Stop network under the Workforce Investment Act. Local workforce investment boards, service delivery providers, case managers, and, most importantly, our customers need to make informed decisions in order to take full advantage of the myriad opportunities presented to them in this system, and accurate labor market information is obviously key to the success of that system."

Hazel Loucks, Illinois Deputy Governor for Workforce and Education

Millions of adults and young people want help in making career decisions...

One in ten adults – that's over 20 million Americans – say they need help in making career plans or in selecting, changing, or getting a job.

About 4.5 million young people, 16 percent of 18–25 year olds, also said they need such assistance.

National Survey of Working Americans, 1999, National Career Development Association, www.ncda.org

We will work to provide:

- Improved career information in electronic formats and printed publications, as well as new career videos, to help young people and adults make career decisions,
- State workforce information systems, as partners in America's Workforce Network, that help customers make career and training decisions by using occupational skills and characteristics data and assessment tools,
- Quality, short-term industry and occupational employment forecasts that help customers assess opportunities in their local labor markets, and
- Access to occupational supply information that will assist customers in making training investment decisions.

Link Consumer Reports and Workforce Information Delivery. ETA is supporting the development of systems to identify the track record of training programs. This information, referred to as "consumer reports," is designed for use by individuals who are receiving training funded by the Workforce Investment Act. Consumer reports also will add an important new dimension to information resources for assisting all individuals in making training decisions. The Council will promote the linkage to and integration of consumer reports information in state workforce information delivery.

We will work to provide:

- Seamless access to information on the performance of training providers for use in making training decisions.

Job developer uses information to help individuals with disabilities...

"Your labor market information has helped me to focus my job development pursuits on several occasions, in particular for jobs in retail, services, and manufacturing. Without your overviews and specifics of what's happening out there, I couldn't confidently advocate employment and fair wages for persons with disabilities. Our program has successfully provided a wide variety of work and high volume of work over the last 14 months, and your contribution to that effort cannot be overstated.

Thank You!"

Ensure Universal Access to Workforce Information. States will continue to improve their workforce information delivery systems, assist workforce investment boards, and produce analysis products. The Employment and Training Administration and the States will continue the development and delivery of the job matching and information systems comprising America's Career Kit. These electronic systems and other media are designed to serve the full range of customers: employers, young people exploring career options, first-time job seekers, people returning to the labor force, individuals moving from welfare to the work force, job losers, workers who are relocating or exploring job and career changes.

We will work to provide:

- Seamless access to information and services in the One-Stop centers,
- More understandable State and local workforce information, using formats tailored to different types of users, and more graphics and analysis,
- More timely information, as States use the standardized database system to update their delivery systems more easily and efficiently, and
- Better planning, evaluation, and service delivery, as State and local workforce investment boards get the information and help they need.

Improve Staff Skills and Tools. To meet customers' needs, workforce information staff need continuing professional development to improve their skills. They also need improved analysis tools, such as software and analysis methods. Workforce investment boards also want staff training on how to use workforce information.

Existing staff development activities will be better coordinated and expanded to cover analysis, use of technology, customer service, and additional technical skills.

The Council will work with the LMI Institute to improve coordination of training and to develop new training methods and materials. The Labor Market Information (LMI) Institute is a comprehensive national program whose mission is to provide training to LMI professionals and users across the United States, and to foster communication within the LMI field. It is run by a consortium of States.

We will work to provide:

- Better-skilled state workforce information staff to provide more and better analysis of important topics, and special assistance to customers.

Kentucky filling workforce information gaps...

Employers, workforce professionals, and educators in nine focus groups around the Bluegrass State said future projections of employment and training needs were their most important type of labor market information. They also placed a high priority on occupational data that identify the skills required for jobs and type of training that should be offered.

The Kentucky Workforce Investment Board and Cabinet for Workforce Development are responding with action to collect and distribute new information to fill the gaps in the State's workforce information system. Additionally, they are planning to reformat existing data to make them more accessible to the citizens and businesses of the Commonwealth and to develop a comprehensive, web-based workforce information system.

Moving the System Forward – A Progress Report

Over the last two years, the Workforce Information Council has laid the foundation for improving the content, quality, and delivery of workforce information to its many and diverse customers.

The highlights of progress to date are new and expanded workforce information, creating the mechanisms for improving the system, communication and outreach, and gathering customer input.

New and Expanded Workforce Information

The first annual plan of the Council stressed new and expanded DOL workforce information initiatives. At BLS, one initiative for FY 2001 is improving local labor force data. At ETA, the initiatives include collecting occupational skills data through O*NET, providing additional State labor market information products and services, expanding customer access to that information produced by the State LMI units, and developing performance and consumer reports information required by the Workforce Investment Act.

Mechanisms for Improving the System

Policy Councils. To carry out improvements in the BLS cooperative statistical programs, the Council relies primarily on "policy councils." With the pre-existing Occupational Employment Statistics Policy Council as a model, the Council has established similar Federal-State bodies for the Covered Employment and Wages, Current Employment Statistics, and Local Area Unemployment Statistics programs.

Occupational Information Impacts funding decisions in Florida...

The Florida Department of Education uses lists of targeted occupations to distribute about $700 million in State and federal education and training funds each year, in response to a State law that training be directed toward high skill/high wage occupations. The targeted occupations are identified using Statewide and local occupational employment projections and wage information produced by the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation. The State workforce investment board uses the same list to guide workforce development planning, and local boards use the list, along with local input, in establishing training accounts for individuals receiving training funded by the Workforce Investment Act.

Work Groups. The Council has created work groups to address specific issues within defined time periods, and recognizes and works with groups established by other organizations. To date, four work groups have been created, and three have completed their work. Work group charters, member lists, and reports are available on the Council web site.

The Council carried out a review of the needs for and uses of plant closing and mass layoff data, with the assistance of the Plant Closing and Mass Layoff Statistics Work Team. The Team's March 2000 report and recommendations helped lead to allocation of appropriated funds for the Mass Layoff Statistics program, and initial steps to measure dynamic labor market change.

In January 2000, the Funding Agreements Work Group provided its report and recommendations concerning the BLS cooperative agreements with States for the statistical programs, and the ETA grant agreement for the LMI One-Stop funding. The Council adopted the work group's recommendations, which BLS and ETA implemented with agreements concluded during calendar 2000.

The Funding Allocation Work Team provided its initial report in March 2000, documenting the processes used by BLS and ETA to distribute funds among States for the BLS cooperative programs and the ETA LMI One-Stop grant. The Work Team used these results to develop its recommendations for new BLS funding allocations, presented in August 2000. This team also addressed the issue of three-year funding for the BLS programs raised by the Congress during the FY 2000 appropriations process. This issue is still under discussion.

Employer uses wage data for pay range decisions...

Recently the human resources director at a manufacturer of cabinets and rack systems for computer and communications networks needed information on wage ranges for new hire positions. The employment relations coordinator at the local workforce investment board downloaded for him the local occupational wage information from the State's labor market information web site, and referred him to the web site for further resources. He was pleased with the service and appreciated having a starting point for establishing pay ranges.

Workforce development customer uses information to choose a career...

Jane, a client of a northern California One-Stop career center, got career-interest scores that suggested she would be well suited to a career in social services as well as one in technology. She and her employment advisor reviewed the occupational outlook and training directory from the State labor market information office. They examined the nature of various jobs, the training required, the working conditions, and pay.

Jane was very excited to learn about the strong demand and good pay for computer network technicians. Jane is now focused on a career in that field, and is pursuing the needed education. The employment advisor thanked the State for providing the right information. "It really helps us and our clients zero in on a vocation that will be realistic for this area. I use the occupational outlook information with all my clients so they can make an informed decision on a career, and then make an employment plan."

In June 2000, a Customer Satisfaction Work Team was established to assist in the development of the customer satisfaction measurement program for the workforce information system. This team's work is continuing during 2001, emphasizing the development of customer feedback tools for use by States.

Consortia. Various federal-State consortia and similar groups have been created in recent years, usually with ETA funding, to carry out specific projects for improving the workforce information system. The Long-Term Projections Consortium has developed methods and software for State use in preparing industry and occupational projections. The Short-Term Forecasts Consortium has developed and implemented across the nation both industry and occupational forecasting systems that have Statewide and substate capability. The ALMIS Database Consortium has developed and maintains a database design and software to standardize workforce data for more efficient delivery system development and maintenance. To date, the Career Video Consortium has filmed, edited, and distributed 196 occupation videos, with 93 more underway. The LMI Institute continues to provide analysis training as well as training in marketing and other special topics. The Employer Database Consortium provides all States with a comprehensive publicly accessible employer list for use by job seekers and other customers.

Finally, the MicroMatrix Work Group, with the assistance of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, develops and maintains methods, software, and training in the production of State and local employment projections.

The Council has reviewed the activities of these groups to identify research activities, budget requirements, and the relationship of these groups to the Workforce Information System plan's goals and objectives.

Communications and Outreach

The Council's web site, www.workforceinfocouncil.org, facilitates communication about the workforce information system and the Council's role and activities. This site describes the workforce information system and provides news and information on Council activities. Key documents also are available on the site.

The Council has developed customer-oriented materials about workforce information, which have been widely distributed through mailings and conference presentations. During calendar 2000, Council presentations on the workforce information system were made at eight national conferences.

Customer Satisfaction Measurement

While a formal customer satisfaction measurement program is not yet in place, the Council sought customer input for this plan through several avenues, including focus groups and discussions with workforce investment board representatives, reviewing customer input received from State employment statistics agencies, workforce investment boards, and others, and requesting input from key stakeholder groups.

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Region 3
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The Workforce-Information Council was established in response to the Workforce Investment Act, which calls for the Secretary of Labor, through the Bureau of Labor Statistics and with other federal agencies and State employment statistics representatives, to plan for and oversee the nationwide workforce information system.

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20